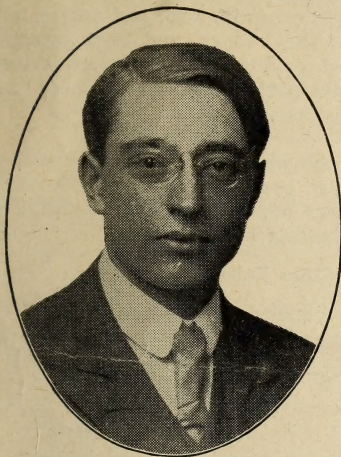


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GOVERNING CITIES BY COMMISSIONS

Remarkable Spread of the "Commission Idea".—Centralizing Power
and Fixing Responsibility with Provision for
Initiative, Referendum and Recall.

By DON E. MOWRY



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YOU are interested in bettering your city. I am interested in bettering mine. What are we going to do? Clean out the old party lines and create new ones without changing the system? It will never do. The result will simply be purification of the dilettante and sporadic type.

One by one the cities are adopting the centralized form of government known as the *commission* plan. Notice this: In places where the commission idea has taken hold there is no return to the old, complicated, power-distributed plan where freedom has full swing in the management of the city's affairs.

And more.

Over twenty-five cities, that I can name, off hand, have seriously considered the adoption of the commission plan within the past six months.

What is the idea?

Simply this: City administration is carried on by commissioners, usually five in number, who direct, control, and are responsible for every department, and even the department executives. Party politics is removed from city elections; complexities of administration are reduced; the ward system is abolished; the finances are placed upon a business basis and responsibility is definitely fixed in case of mismanagement.

Galveston Led the Movement

GALVESTON was the first city to try the new experiment, in 1902. Its success is now undisputed. All officers are now elective. The five commissioners appoint the subordinate officers, and are themselves elected by the people at large. The president of the commission is elected separately and is called the mayor.

Different departments are assigned to the commissioners; that is, streets and public improvements, fire and police, etc. This body or board determines the budget, and each commissioner has a voice in the final estimate for his department. There is no one-man power, you notice, and all accounts are gone over in a business-like manner.

Salaries?

For all of his responsibility the mayor of Galveston receives \$2,000 a year, and the other commissioners, \$1,200 each. Think of it! And Galveston does not contemplate returning to the old cumbersome way of handling city business.

Other Texas Cities Followed

HOUSTON has followed the general features of the Galveston plan. All elections are from the city at large, and elective officers must be owners of real estate and have had a residence of five years in the city. No financial measure is ever considered as an emergency measure, and so cannot be passed on the day it is introduced. Provision for the referendum is made on petition of 500 voters or more, upon all matters of franchises and propositions for municipal purchase. Members of the council cannot hold other offices or be interested in any public work.

In 1907, the legislature granted new charters to Fort Worth, Dallas, Denison, El Paso, and Greenville, along similar lines.

The Des Moines Plan

TWO years ago, Iowa passed a law allowing cities to organize under the commission form. Des Moines, being the first city in the state to organize under this law, is often spoken of as the Iowa model and the plan is called the *Des Moines Plan*.

This is the best plan, I believe, for many reasons. A uniform system is provided for cities of a given population. Penalties are imposed for bribery during elections and for violations of the election laws. A majority vote is necessary to pass a measure. A sliding scale is provided for the salaries of the mayor

and councilmen, according to the size of the city. All franchises to public service corporations must be submitted to the vote of the people for approval.

Civil service, uniform city accounts, the recall, the initiative and the referendum are all given a place, and provision is made for municipal ownership of all public utilities.

The Des Moines plan is the most advanced form of commission government yet put into operation. The people have an absolute check upon the administration. They can assert their rights at any juncture. They control their representatives. Responsibility is fixed.

Many Cities Falling in Line

BOISE and Lewiston have such charters in Idaho. In Lewiston franchises are limited to twenty-five years, after which time, the city may acquire the property. In Boise, no special elections are held.

The South Dakota law follows the Galveston plan.

The Kansas law is applicable to cities of the first class. Cities in the states of Massachusetts, Maine, Tennessee, Virginia and Oregon have fallen in line. The commission idea is here to stay, and simply because it is meeting with unmistakable success.

The idea has awakened more civic spirit in Cedar Rapids than was ever before known there. This new idea is making a new Cedar Rapids. Men and women consult the members on a hundred things, seemingly trivial as a single proposition, yet important in the civil development as a whole. These matters, great and small, receive prompt attention—so prompt, indeed, that men of years of experience under the old plan are really dazed by the suddenness of action at times.

The commission appointed to investigate the departments of Lynn, Massachusetts, has very recently made its report. The commission states that it is of the opinion that it is impossible to get the best results under the present form of city government. It recommends that action be taken to obtain a new charter and a new form of government based on the Des Moines or Haverhill (Mass.) plan, consisting of a board of five members elected by the people.

Committees in Portland and Tacoma, Washington, indorse the commission plan.

Governor Stubbs of Kansas announced recently that he would urge the next legislature to amend the enabling law for cities of the first and second class so that they can, if they

choose, adopt either the Des Moines or the Galveston plan of commission rule.

At the present time, cities of California are endeavoring to have new charters adopted by the people and ready for ratification by the legislature. The popular clamor seems to be for a centralization of power in order to govern more economically.

Value of the New Idea

HERE is the value of the commission plan of government.

It shows us that the movement for reform extends across the continent, marks the general dissatisfaction with the results of the existing system of municipal administration, and opens the way for simplified, economical administration.

More expensive? No, by no means.

In Cedar Rapids, after one year's experience, it is seen the salary list is much larger than under the old plan, this being still further increased by the fact that more clerks are employed than formerly. In return for this, however, the city's business is kept written up, and is checked up and indexed like the business of a bank, and is always ready for inspection.

The commission started in with the plan of paying cash for everything purchased and adhered to it. More paving, curbing, and sidewalks have been built this past year than ever before; the streets and parks are said to have been kept in better condition; the municipal water plant has been improved and extended and a new fire station is being erected. Notwithstanding the increased amount of improvements being carried on, it is stated that the end of the year will find a surplus in the city treasury.

You and I want to see the commission idea win more successes. We want to simplify our city government. We want better service.

Don't you think this plan will do it?

The growing popularity and success of the idea seems to leave no doubt in my mind.

The one great need for permanent and genuine municipal reform is a quickened civic spirit among business men and more substantial citizens. But it may also be admitted that so complicated a machinery of municipal government as has existed, with its divisions of power among numerous departments and petty places of divided or doubtful responsibility, has played a part in repelling the active interest of business men and turning the city government over to ward leaders and their professional following.